

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee,

My name is Catherine Off. I am a speech-language pathologist in Missoula who serves stroke survivors, traumatic brain injury survivors, and individuals with degenerative diseases like multiple sclerosis. I am also a clinical supervisor and professor at The University of Montana. I am here today, not representing the University of Montana, but representing the citizens of Montana with speech, language, and hearing impairments and those who serve them. I am here to advocate for the passage of SB 230.

The passage of SB 230 is crucial for the citizens of Montana and for those who serve them. This legislation is particularly important for those individuals who have limited access to a local speech-language pathologist or audiologist because of geographic, physical, or financial barriers. The clients I serve have difficulties speaking, reading, writing, understanding spoken or written language, and may have difficulties with memory and attention. Improving and maintaining communication abilities for these individuals is essential for their continued participation in their social, vocational, and relational roles.

Senate Bill 230 is extremely important for a number of reasons:

1. Montana is a large, rural state with too few speech-language pathologists;
2. Expertise in various speech, language, and hearing disorders is essential;
3. Intensive and frequent therapy is deemed best practice for stroke and traumatic brain injury rehabilitation; yet many individuals do not have access to such services in their area.

This bill will authorize telepractice of speech-language pathology and audiology, a practice supported by the national professional associations and already adopted by 16 other states. It will bring needed high-quality, confidential services to patients in their homes via the Internet. This Bill is necessary because the Department of Labor and Industry attorneys do not believe that the board of speech-language pathologist and audiologists have the rulemaking authority to authorize telepractice.

Other rural states in the nation rely upon telepractice to provide services to these people in need. The American Speech-Language and Hearing Association endorses and provides education and training for telepractice for practicing clinicians. The Montana Speech-Language and Hearing Association fully supports this bill. Our Montana Board of Licensure in Speech-Language Pathology endorses this bill. Any audiologist or speech-language pathologist providing services via telepractice must still be licensed by the board. This includes any professional located outside of Montana providing services to Montanans.

Please add the endorsement of practicing speech-language pathologists. This bill is for all of the citizens of the state of Montana and for those that could be given the gift of communication through teletherapy.

Catherine A. Off, Ph.D., CCC-SLP